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Review

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REVIEW

Interesting Times? Venice Biennale and Berlin Art Week 2019

Video Ergo Sum: Venice Biennale

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A discursive and reflective review of the Venice Biennale and Berlin Art Week, 2019, which draws inferences and conclusions from these events, contextualising them within wider cultural politics.

Keywords: Venice Biennale; Berlin Art Week; Curators; Gentrification; Studio Provision; Affordability

A shadowed figure is digging in a plot of land. There is an insistent aural background of 'dark grey noise'. The camera pans to the ground and back up again. There is murmuring in an incomprehensible language. Why is he digging? Is he burying a body, laying a mine, or perhaps putting down a drain? The camera pans back. He seems to be...digging his allotment.

Actually, that is not the content of one of the many screen-based works at this year's Biennale; I just made it up. But let us say that it is an auto-generated archetype of so much of that content. It is yet another wander through the territory of 'horror bathos', the seemingly banal invested with a sense of darker purpose which is never disclosed, at least not within the work itself. I believe film buffs call it the 'Antonioni chill', the apprehension that something, somewhere is going to turn out nasty, but doesn't ... yet.

This Biennale was the tenth presided over by Paolo Baratta, immensely shrewd and articulate, who has piloted it through a ... well ... *Venetian* complexity of cultural politics to a state of health where not only is it less dependent on sponsorship but

'our visitors have become our main partner; more than half are under 26' (Baratta 2019). By comparison with the average visitor age of, say, the RA in London, this deserves congratulation. Baratta is acutely aware of the tensions arising from both the Biennale's avowed cosmopolitanism and its ambivalent relationship with the art market. The former, so easily assumed to be a virtue in the late 90s, is now attacked by resurgent nationalism and also critiqued as a pretext for corporate 'cultural appropriation'. The latter, which has become adept at presenting as counter-cultural 'disruptions' to itself, what are merely 'the diktats of prevailing trends', is 'never asleep' (to quote the academic Olav Velthuis in *Le Quotidien de l'Art* (Adam 2019: 13) in its search for new material to feed such a process. Baratta has a difficult task to negotiate this landscape, comparing it in a rather long folk parable, to what in English would be known as being the only lamp post in a street full of dogs.

This year's invited curator was Ralph Rugoff, Director of the Hayward Gallery in London since 2006, often presenting strongly thematic shows. He entitled the Biennale: *May You Live In Interesting Times*, which was purported to be an old Chinese curse, but in fact was invented by a British diplomat. Rugoff sees such fakery as emblematic of our own 'interesting' era, where self-reinforcing 'fake news' websites have exploited a post-truth intellectual climate created by poststructuralist sophistry, which has undermined the possibility of independent truth-values surviving whatever hermeneutic layers rest upon them. But his own aesthetic positions seem to offer no help: 'art's complexity, its signals riddled with contradictions and ambivalence, can illuminate aspects of our current social relations and psyches' (Rugoff 2019), and again: 'Art is a space of complexity that itself instigates the idea that art doesn't have meaning' (Frenzel 2019: 10). The theoretical relationship between art and notions of truth is defeatingly complex, at least in Western aesthetics, and between it and notions of meaning even more so, suffice to say that just as theories of truth broadly divide into those of contingency (sometimes called correspondence) and those of coherence, so there is a spectrum of postulates of 'artistic truth' running from the utterly contingent (e.g Ruskin) and the autonomously coherent (e.g Nelson Goodman). As for artistic meaning, Kant's associated notions of the 'purposive',

resisting utilitarian considerations, and what this elicits, the 'reflective judgement', departing from stable categorisations, have long since enlarged its scope far beyond the mere recognition of what is represented or symbolised. Rugoff clearly doesn't want contemporary art to be burdened with strong claims to truth or meaning, or to have much polemical purpose either, but it is not clear what he would propose otherwise. For a curator of such a large show, this could be seen as somewhat empty.

But 'truth' will out somehow, and what was conspicuous about this Biennale, both in the two centrally curated spaces (Giardini Pavilion and Arsenale) and the national pavilions, was the plethora of what could be described as documentary work, addressing the mundane and the crisis-ridden with grim determination. If the Biennale does indeed supply the art market with ideas and future directions, then we may be in for a lot of austerity, aesthetic as well as economic. At a Biennale a decade ago, there was a similar tendency to investigate the dark side, but it was historically directed and done with a degree of visual invention. Not so now, where some installations, text – and diagram – heavy, could be mistaken for sociology projects or planning applications. It is not pleasant to single one out, but the Bosnian Pavilion could stand for many, which have all virtually slipped from memory. And everywhere there was a lot, I mean a lot, of video, of which my opening parody is a fair representation. It is clear that the twentieth century modernist art space, with its even lighting and bright, featureless walls, makes video work difficult to present, requiring enclosures and copious drapery. But curiously, those national pavilions located in Venetian *palazetti*, with their restricted light, smaller dimensions and heavy decoration, could show them to an advantage; it was almost as if the very incommensurability between venue and work acted as an effective contrasting frame. I only wish that the content of most of them was accordingly engrossing.

In contrast to the national pavilions, Rugoff was happy to say that painting was generously featured in his own curation this year, amplified by his policy (or perhaps the Biennale's economy?) of presenting 79 artists, about half the usual number, but each with works in both the Giardini and the Arsenale. After 2017's dry-as-dust museological succession of vitrines, this was a relief, and there were some reasonably

rewarding sights. Several artists linger in the mind: Jill Mulleady and Nicole Eisenmann, whose work within a similar idiom of light, thinly worked figuration, blending 'realist' and cartoonish tropes; Julie Mehretu, who builds up dynamic palimpsests of sensitive gestural marks (to our minds more effectively than the likes of Twombly); Avery Singer, virtuoso of the airbrush, creates constructions and plays around with mirror-surface additions to the picture plane; Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who combines collage and portraiture in interior scenes of black family groups, and, notwithstanding her recent heavy exposure, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, exhibiting at the Ghanaian pavilion. Please note, and not by any design, all the above are women.

It was noticeable this year that the collateral events were often more compelling than the national pavilions. The Pinchuk Foundation, which each Biennale shows the finalists of an international competition for artists under 35, demonstrated that, when it comes to digital art, the young ones often have a technical panache their elders lack. The winner, Emilija Skarnulyte from Lithuania, created a spectacular 3D screen installation of industrial and archaeological monuments, as did Jakob Steensen, from Denmark, simulating vegetal landscapes. The European Cultural Centre, spread across two *palazzi* and a small park, presented its usual mix of the brilliant (e.g Carole Feuerman), the intriguing (several) and the awful (don't ask).

The Pinault Foundation at the Grassi hosted Luc Tuymans, appearing as enervatedly grey as ever in Renaissance splendour. At the Palazzo Cini (not to be confused, as we did, with the eponymous foundation on San Giorgio), there was a chance to see the latest directions of Adrian Ghenie, who represented Romania in 2015, and who has now moved into a fascinating, layered, territory which perhaps has links to post-cubist Thirties Picasso and to Bacon, but which is authentically his own. And he does some of the best grotesque, Trumpesque heads to be seen anywhere, obviously so departing from Rugoff's topic neutrality.

Even more off-mainstream were shows like *Anima Mundi*, split over two sites and containing some weird and wonderful stuff amongst others, and the newly launched Giudecca Art District, a collection of spaces in old industrial sheds there, one of



Iggy Rodriguez. *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, 2019.
European Cultural Centre, Venice Biennale. Photo: Neil Harvey.

which exhibited Hiroyuki Masuyama's skilful digital pastiches of Turner watercolours of the City, demonstrating how subtly photo-layering (of the kind for which Idris Khan has become known) can be manipulated. And lastly, let me mention a small show of haunting Venetian landscapes at the Scuola Internazionale di Grafica, by Martin Brown.



Adrian Ghenie. 'Untitled' 2019. Palazzo Cini. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

On the whole, however, 2019 was one of the least (if not *the* least) impressive Biennales we have seen. The highlights here picked out were against a background of forgettable worthiness or whimsy. I am beginning to think that the reason for such flatness lies in the system of professionalised curation as it has developed over the last 30 years (before that, curators were called merely 'selectors'). The unit of production and career self-advancement for the curator is the show, and not individual works in it. Regarding curators' choices for these, the reality is that whatever the quality of work, an artist's reputation is built up rather like a Ponzi scheme: esteem indicators reach a quorate point, often carefully managed by dealers, where others flood in to endorse these, the latecomers being used to retrospectively validate the original ones. The whole process rests upon art-world actors' universal habit of speaking the language of what could be called meta-judgementality, curatorial judgements citing and redacting over other curators' judgements. Given the facility of the internet to collate these, together with reduced images, the curator has thus become a deeply self-interested co-ordinator of tokens bearing an art-political value which has in turn

been conferred by others in the profession. It sounds circuitous (or rather Ponzi-like), because it is. Unfortunately, whatever Baratta's good intentions, in such a system any Biennale now represents a collection of futures bets made by careerist curators hoping they have bought into rising stock. And in such a game, the works themselves, and the experience of them, are byproducts, all but lost; as economists might say, the process is over-mediated. Curation, alas, has created, even in the ostensibly non-commercial precincts of the Biennale, a market in its own members' reputations, and the resulting work this year was generally and predictably dull.

This year's winner of the *Leone d'Oro* was Lithuania (they obviously had a good year), who, defying the trend, filled an Arsenale hall with sand and staged a jolly beach performance regularly breaking into song (*Sun & Sea (Marina)*). At least it was fun. And though this word would be unequal to capturing what responses to art can be, it does indicate that art has to seek some state of fascinating the spectator/participant into giving it attention. Fascination was in short supply in Venice in 2019.



Sun & Sea (Marina), 2019. Lithuanian Pavilion, Venice Biennale.
Video clip: Susan Broadhurst.

Alles is not Ordnung: Berlin Art Week

Berlin, the once bedraggled survivor of the War and enforced partition, is not what it used to be. Sitting at a monumentally expensive café on the Pariser Platz, it is difficult to believe that the Brandenburg Gate opposite, until the nineties, stood as a ruin, like some vast blackened set of teeth, in a waste ground behind the Wall, or that property could be squatted by whatever creative people showed up (this year is of course the thirtieth anniversary of the Wall's demolition, informing so many cultural events). Even recently 'Poor but Sexy' was coined by Klaus Wowereit, the city's former (and controversial) Social Democratic mayor, as the city's marketing tag. Well it certainly doesn't appear poor any more (at least not by UK standards), but is it still sexy?

That very slogan has a problematic connotation for Anh-Linh Ngo, the curator of 'Politics of Space in New Berlin' at the Neue Berliner Kunstverein (Hohmann 2019a: 33). For him it is yet another manifestation of the international civic strategy of using the reputation of creative countercultures to gentrify localities and to act as a cover for privatising hitherto accessible property, with which we are very familiar in East London. Sexy equals Cool equals ... well ... loadsamoney for developers. The Berlin artistic community, from what I hear, has in the past benefited from far more supportive attitudes from civic authorities than in London, but it is too easy to accept the sad inexorability of this process; artists everywhere are now the temporary advance guard of the leveraging of property values that will rapidly drive them out.

Berlin Art Week, in its eighth year, is a portmanteau of shows and events including 'seventeen museums and exhibition venues, two art fairs, fifteen private collections, and twenty project spaces' ('Berlin Art Week Press Release'). That private collectors are willing to open themselves up to casual visitors is an indication of a fundamental civic-mindedness that would be rare in the UK. Suffice to say, we didn't manage to get round all of these. The Art Week organisation is enthusiastic and courteous, but from the information provided, needs some refining: unlike London, Berlin venues are scattered across the city, and the map is, frankly, even worse drafted than the Venice Biennale's, with a separate list of openings which has to be correlated with the bizarrely numbered locations, and it doesn't come in a legible downloadable format,

making it difficult to plan in advance. The cultural information desk at Schoenefeld Airport had none of these, and weren't even sure what Art Week was. Berlin is known, as all tourist guides say, for its laid-back spirit, but perhaps this was laid-back to the point of invisibility.

During this week there were two art fairs, both held in the vast concrete crescent of Nazi-era hangars at the former Tempelhof Airport. *Art Berlin*, the larger, is a collaboration with *Art Cologne*, now in its third year. This is a fair that aims to become a cosmopolitan European event. Unfortunately, such an aspiration seems to have disclosed the same identity problems as alluded to above. Its Director Maike Cruse, concedes that these are risk-averse times for collectors, and, ominously, says the fair has been working with the 'German association of professional art advisors' (Hohmann 2019b: 22). The result was a range of work, that, with some refreshing exceptions, one can only describe as corporate: large numbers of 'process-based' works (often overpainted photo and collaged laminates) which seem made for company headquarters, edgy enough to let the acquirer look cool, but not interesting enough to distract from the meetings. Is this a reflection of the nature and requirements of the most reliable buyers? From the uniformly black (again corporate) wardrobe of the visitors at the opening, it seems that it is. I have to say that the manner of the fair's staff would not exactly encourage a broadening of interest: perhaps *Art Berlin* will accept in future that if being able to display one's editorship of, or engagement by, a web journal is sufficient accreditation for Venice, then it should do for them, rather than insisting on an international press pass that few writers beyond the broadsheets actually possess. And if they do wish to broaden interest, to charge 36€ for the Opening, rather than the daily 22€, is, in marketing terms, somewhat counter-intuitive.

There could not be more contrast with *Positions*, a smaller fair now in its sixth year, where kids with placards actually direct you to the location (unlike the above, which was difficult to find). One of its Directors, Kristian Jarmuschek, declared: 'we moved away from a more superficial, market-centred perspective and focused on the relevance of the artistic positions instead', and the other, Heinrich Carstens,

continued 'visitors should discover art for themselves – not as a status symbol, but as an inspiring part of their lives' (Meixner 2019, 35). What a relief to hear such talk, and the content of this fair, on the whole, did not disappoint, in fact its mainly German composition disclosed a depth of talent and technical solidity lacking in its counterpart. There is a certain specifically German idiom of accomplished, somewhat angst-ridden hybridized figuration, which one will not see at, say, *Basel* or *Frieze*, and this fair was rich in it. It is invidious to pick out a few, but the works at Thomas Fuchs, Schmalfluss, Von & Von, and Gudberg Nerger were worth a lot more attention than we had time for, and would certainly disrupt meetings if hung in the boardroom. Not wanting to, as it were, send philosophical coals to Newcastle (a proverb that dates from the UK's remote industrial past), but two aesthetic notions recur when trying to capture the effect of good art: the aforementioned 'Reflective Judgement' of Kant (*Critique of Judgement*), the free interplay of understanding and imagination that just goes on, and Heidegger's Hermeneutic Spiral (*Being and Time*), the fact that such rumination simply does go on and on without any discrete, satiated conclusion. I felt both here. And all for the discounted opening entry of 6€.

As regards the range of shows across Berlin, honesty compels me to say that we could only manage a few, somewhat slowed down by the vagueness of the map, and also that syndrome, familiar to those seeking an East End private view, of the disappearing gallery, which took us to Kreuzberg, walking round a kebab shop trying to find an entrance (what one could call the pre-hermeneutic circle). When we did make it to an opening, it is conspicuous how essentially formal these occasions can be. At the Schering Foundation's Project Space, an installation, *Hyperdruse*, by Anna Virnich, of scented wax poured onto rumpled sheeting, was opened by a roomful of dressed tables, very good wines, and prepared speeches from curator and artist. No plastic dustbin filled with iced Peroni bottles here.

We went over to the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, an elegant 50s venue near the Bundestag, expecting a show *Reading Bodies! Cruising Corpuliteracy*; what we got was a full academic conference, albeit presenting content that was not entirely fresh. It is heartening to see that there is still a close integration of serious cerebration and



Timo Von Eicken. *Totalschaden*, 2017. Positions Art Fair, Berlin 2019. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Franziska Maderthaler. *Inside 11*, 2019. Positions Art Fair, Berlin 2019. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.



Anna Virnich. *Hyperdruse*, 2019. Schering Stiftung, Berlin. Photo: Susan Broadhurst.

artistic creativity in German culture in a way that the English predilection for mere literary verbalism lacks.

This would be, however, to ignore what Berlin has been known for since the Weimar years (with a desperate intermission), namely, dedicated collective hedonism. The nineties clubbing scene, reliant on a plentiful supply of derelict venues no-one wanted, was fondly remembered in *No Photos on the Dance Floor!* at C/O Berlin, the title referring to a lately widespread prohibition, supported by a Berlin byelaw, when phone-cameras became ubiquitous. As a result this was a show mainly of *nostalgie de la boue* ('nostalgia for the gutter') pre-digital prints. Apparently in these clubs 'cultural experimentation took precedence over commercial success' (Zwirner



Private View of *Hyperdruse* at Schering Stiftung, 2019.



Nicht Ganz Aber Nahezu – Not quite but Nearly the Old Berlin.
Private View at Konrad Fischer, Berlin Art Week, 2019. Photo: Neil Harvey.

2019, 42) but one has to say hard work seems to have taken precedence over both, for (and one hesitates to stereotype), this was a world of Germanically Serious and Thorough Ways of Having Fun, with a penchant for the carnivalesque, post-punk grotesque and 'fetishesque' of an intensity that could not be encountered elsewhere. It was noticeable that most visitors were studenty types, probably too young to have participated, and much more conventionally dressed too.

Such technological advances were also conspicuous at a show at the Akademie der Kunst, *Magic Media – Media Magic/Video art since the 1970's from the Wulf Herzogenrath Archive*. This was a reminder of how much pre-digital video art almost elicited a certain act of faith from the viewer, that the blurry analogue images and basic manipulations would reward attention, however dowdy they appear compared to what is achievable today. Much of this work really was straining against the medium, awaiting technical advances in presentation, but had a certain archaeological fascination nevertheless. The show concluded with more recent examples, notably a moving short work by Marcel Odenbach, *Im Schiffbruch nicht schwimmen können (Foundering and You Can't Swim, 2011)* in which three African migrants in the Louvre contemplate that masterpiece of abject abandonment on the seas, Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*.

To infer conclusions, I sense that culturally Berlin is in a state of tension, realising that it is at a crossroads. When it was an immiserated ex-capital, with cosmopolitanism forced upon it by virtue of the partitioning between the victorious allies, it had that existential creative freedom which comes from having no expectations of improvement. What else was there to do, but to create what one wanted to, in whatever obscurity? Its reputation has been founded on the fruits of such privations. Now, thirty years after re-unification, it is a capital once more, with the self-generated prosperity of rising property values, and with its cultural identity in danger of being reduced to mere instrumentality for that prosperity. Culture has found itself teleologically hijacked, so to speak.

Well, Berlin can learn from the mistakes of others. Unlike London, it should not assume that because the art market (or rather the few major players in it) appears healthy, so the production of art can take care of itself. It never can. The requisite

care it should provide is simply expressed: as Tim Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil of the *Gropius Bau* declare: 'The single most important factor is to maintain, create and provide affordable spaces as artist studios, living spaces and exhibition spaces' (*tip Berlin* 2019: 39), and Bernadette La Hengst of the *Statista* Project adds: 'Stop filling every free space with real estate ... That means: affordable rents for housing and ateliers and inner-city areas that incorporate non-commercial spaces' (*tip Berlin* 2019: 47). In this respect Berlin seems to be where London was about fifteen years ago, when studio spaces were still just affordable but were being squeezed from the centre, since when it has become virtually impossible here to find affordable spaces in the inner suburbs, causing an egregious exodus of artists to other towns (one should add that the situation in London is exacerbated by supposedly charitable studio providers now aping the tricks and habits of sleazier commercial landlords).

Berlin still has a chance to arrest this process of cultural auto-evisceration. Again, by way of contrast, for forty years the arts in the UK have had to present themselves as primarily instrumental, as being drivers of relatively prompt economic gain, in order to secure what little government subsidy they can get (which will become more pressing after Brexit). But there is a settled tradition in Germany that the arts are a fit and proper recipient of state (or municipal) support irrespective of such claimed consequences. And lastly, it is salient how in German political *Weltanschauungen*, both Christian and Social Democrat, market mechanisms are to be constrained in their operation by a philosophically 'personalist' purpose which eschews the reduction of individuals to the status of a mere economic agent, the arts being an enhancement of that personhood. Even economists now refer to such things as 'social capital'. These are, especially now, after decades of unquestioned neo-liberal dogma, sexy ideas, and, if it is to save its identity, Berlin should stick with them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Neil Harvey is an artist and writer on art. He is based in East London. He is deeply interested in issues arising from nineteenth century German aesthetic theory.

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